Review section

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New Albums

20th Century Fox

THIN LIZZY: "Johnny The Fox" (Vertigo 9102 012). Phil Lynott (bass, vocals), **Brian Downey** (drums, percussion), **Scott Gorham** (lead guitar), **Brian Robertson** (lead guitar). Produced by **John Alcock** at **Rampart Studios, London,** during July and August, 1976.

THIN LIZZY: true signs of a great album in 'Johnny The Fox'

IT WOULD be quite an album that could eclipse "Jailbreak," the album which established Thin Lizzy earlier this year. It's no mean feat, then, that in the process of nudging its predecessor into the background, "Johnny The Fox" sharpens the band's identity.

The persona of "Jailbreak" was that of a solid, power-chord band, but with plenty of melody, as exemplified by "The Boys Are Back In Town," "Emerald" and "Fight Or Fall."

"Johnny The Fox" retains these characteristics and adds to them. There's more subtlety, the melodies are stronger, and, most importantly, the scope of the material is much wider than the hard rock associated with Lizzy.

Only five of the ten tracks are head-shakers, and the others range from soft ballads to medium-paced numbers. Phil Lynott's writing has at last returned to the versatility that marked "Vagabonds Of The Western World," the first Lizzy's last release.

As I said, Lizzy's identity on "JTF" is more robust than ever, due to the contributions this time of all four members of the band. Take the two guitarists, Scott Gorham and Brian Robertson. Apart from playing better solos ("Fool's Gold," "Johnny," "Boogie Woogie Dance," "Massacre" and "Sweet Marie") stand out, their dual lead work is taken a step further, progressing from the predictable twin runs to the dramatic nuances of "Johnny" and "Old Flame." One minor criticism I would make is that Gorham and Robertson must be careful to avoid overkill: the beautiful "Borderline," for instance, suffers from one guitar overdub too many.

Lynott, however, shapes this identity. Apart from distinctive, rich vocals, the material he has written seems to draw much from his own past. There's a thread running from his early Lizzy days that seems to be knotted on "Johnny The Fox."

The opening track, "Johnny," is in direct line of descent from "Little Darling," right down to the emphatic use of brass. "The Rocker," from "Vagabonds," continues in "Rocky" with its similarly raucous feel (though the vocal is a little harsh) while "Johnny The Fox Meets Jimmy The Weed" recalls the funkiness of "Black Boys On The Corner" and is practically an extension of the riff on the latter. "Boogie Woogie Dance" and the old single, "Randolph's Tango," are associated for the obvious reasons, and the vicious "Massacre" is a cross between two "Jailbreak" tracks, creaming off the neo-Celtic riff of "Emerald" and the crazy chord pattern of "Angel From The Coast.

Lyrically, Lynott veers between the viciousness of the street and heartfelt love songs. "Johnny" and "Johnny The Fox Meets Jimmy The Weed" are stories of urban seediness, and "Rocky," like "The Rocker," proudly proclaims the relationship with rock and roll life. The love songs are "Don't Believe A Word" (complete with stock blues riff and ambiguous lyrics a la 10cc's "I'm Not In Love); the singalong, but touching "Borderline;" "Old Flame" (a lovely chorus), and "Sweet Marie," a poignant, very melodic ballad written with Scott Gorham.

There's also the prospector's story in "Fools Gold." On "Massacre," Lynott poses a controversial question especially pertinent to the religious conflict in Ireland. "If God is in the heavens, how can this happen here?" he asks despairingly.

The subtleties of "Johnny The Fox" are in the little chugging riff hidden behind the main power chord on "Johnny", the second crisp drum beat (Brian Downey is in impeccable form throughout) and sneaky bass line on "Rocky", the beautiful, and admirably restrained, orchestral arrangement on "Sweet Marie" and the tango middle-section that adds a touch of humour to "Boogie Woogie Dance."

You might also like to know that "Johnny The Fox" is, I believe, a pseudonym for Lynott, being a reference to the American expression "foxy" and there is a loose concept to the album built on recollections of incidents involving Johnny's hectic lifestyle.

To conclude, "Johnny The Fox" represents a Thin Lizzy more versatile than on "Jailbreak." It is not as immediately powerful as "Jailbreak," but after a few listens, you realise that its power is deceptive but nevertheless real. There are true signs of a great album. — **H.D.**

STEELEYE SPAN: "Rocket Cottage" (Chrysalis). To come clean, I've found Steeleye's last two albums thoroughly depressing. "All Around My Hat"—by far their biggest success to date—was as blandly opportunist as "Commoners Crown" was grey and emotionless. It's with a mixture of relief, surprise and gratification I bring tidings that the music on "Rocket Cottage" is frequently exhilarating and consistently fresh, easily surpassing those last two works and probably even more satisfying than "Now We Are Six", a potentially brilliant album marred by childish frivolities. Apart from a brief bout of "Campdown Races" done in Deep South gospel style, and some innocuous studio tomfoolery that's been left in, there are no such indulgences here. There's a real and welcome sense of purpose in their performance (and in Mike Batt's astonishingly aggressive production) without the absurd pussyfooting and cultivation of the fol-de-rol image that has preoccupied much of their past. No, this time they mean business, and while there are moments of subtlety and cleverness, they've never been so hard or . . . well, I know it sounds crazy, but downright funky. There's only one way to judge Steeleye now, and that's as a rock band with an exceptional singer, an accomplished fiddler, a watertight rhythm section, and some distinctive quirks, one of which is a quaint reliance on using traditional words with the tunes they've written. The success of "Rocket Cottage" conforms to that reasoning, for it's an album of no pretensions, and with a couple of tracks that verge on out-and-out rock 'n roll, one accompanied by Caribbean rhythms and another on which they resemble the Swingle Singers, it treads pure rock territory. Maddy Prior is a revelation, turning on a deep Helen Shapiro type growl for "Orfeo," a mystical song bubbling with reggae and funk undertones; and giving "The Brown Girl", an awesome tale of spurned love avenged, the innocent appeal of a Sixties pop ballad, yet at the same time incorporating the weird stylisation of a female Bowie. But on his two vocal tracks, "The Twelve Witches" and "Sir James The Rose," both dramatic ballads arranged as irresistible rockers, Bob Johnson fails to reap the full benefit of the spectacular Kemp-Pegrum groundwork. He's far too stilted and inhibited, and could do with some of Maddy's imagination (here she's adding mighty harmonies). It's a shame, for they are otherwise perfect tracks. The real stunner, however, is "Fighting For Strangers", which features Tim Hart recounting a bloody war story while Maddy turns in a chilling chorus to the tune of "To Be A Pilgrim", with Pegrum's barrage of Latin rhythms the sole accompaniment. It's one of the most adventurous things they've ever done, while the quiet "The Drunkard" is effective for different reasons, starting off unaccompanied and gently and effectively building to an underplayed climax, even if there's harshness in the mixing of the vocals. The album's single, "London", is pleasant enough, though I suspect it's one of those things that could become very irritating very quickly. The album is completed by a Knight-led instrumental, "Sligo Maid" (but he's even more impressive on a solo reel that comes at the tail of "Orfeo"), and a rather dull exercise in close harmonies ("The Bosnian Hornpipes"). It doesn't cloud the fact that this is their most encouraging work since "Parcel Of Rogues", even if the approach could hardly be more different. — **C.I.**

RACING CARS: "Downtown Tonight" (Chrysalis). Racing Cars emerged recently as one of the most promising and entertaining groups on the London pub circuit where they have attracted a considerable audience over the last six months. Their performances over the summer particularly have been consistently enjoyable and have been characterised by a refreshing zest and enthusiasm. They proved to be especially engaging because of their commitment to concise, melodic songs (written, usually, by their excellent vocalist Morty), which they performed invariably with flair and intelligence. Their appeal was further enhanced by the subtlety and precision of their musicianship, and for the discretion with which they utilised the skills of their two guitarists, Graham Hedley Williams and Ray "Alice" Ennis. One would have been forgiven for thinking that the band would have experienced some difficulty in translating to record the charm and panache which accompanies their gigs, but this album captures exactly those qualities. The songs here will be familiar to those who have already seen Racing Cars and are attractive enough to easily seduce the casual or uncommitted listener. The band produced the album with the assistance of Bill Price, and they are to be congratulated for the economy and clarity of the recording. The additional vocals, provided by the Bowles Bros. Band — particularly on the energetic "Hard Working Woman" — contributes further to the variety of the album, as does the inclusion of strings to add to the poignant mood of the beautiful "They Shoot Horses Don't They?", and the keyboard flourishes that grace the tender "Ladee-Lo". The band have directed their energies wisely and have not over-extended themselves, concentrating instead on refining their instrumental work and presenting Morty's compositions without unnecessary embellishment. They sound throughout relaxed and confident, approaching with tantalising ease such divergent songs as "Moonshine Fandango", with its Little Feat-inspired rhythms, "Pass The Bottle", with its emphatic, though understated, riffs and elegant guitar solos, and the hallucinatory atmospherics of the title track. It is, in fact, on the three ballads included here — "Ladee-Lo", "Downtown Tonight" and "They Shoot Horses Don't They?" — that Morty, as a writer and singer, is particularly impressive. "Ladee-Lo", which comes complete with quotes from "Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds" (a really striking juxtaposition), has a lazy, drifting melody and features a convincingly passionate love-lorn vocal from the composer. "They Shoot Horses Don't They?", a song inspired by Sydney Pollack's movie about marathon dance competitions during the American Depression, is extraordinarily evocative. Morty's acoustic guitar introduces the song and sets the desolate mood, then the electric guitars pick up the theme and the composition evolves almost in slow motion. The discreet string arrangement complements the melancholic atmosphere, and the haunting chorus creates a feeling of quiet despair. An impeccable climax to an impressive debut. — **A.J.**